

New hope or old futures in disguise? Neoliberalism, the Covid-19 pandemic and the possibility for social change

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to consider the implications of both the Covid-19 pandemic and UK lockdown for the social, political and economic future of the UK. Drawing on primary data obtained during the lockdown and the theoretical concepts of transcendental materialism and the ‘event’, the paper discusses the strength of participants’ attachment to the ‘old normal’ and their dreams of a ‘new normal’.

Design – This paper utilises a semi-structured online survey (n=305) with UK residents and Facebook forum debates collected during the lockdown period in the UK.

Findings – The findings in this paper suggest that while the lockdown suspended daily routines and provoked participants to reflect upon their consumption habits and the possibility of an alternative future, many of our respondents remained strongly attached to elements of pre-lockdown normality. Furthermore, the individual impetus for change was not matched by the structures and mechanisms holding up neoliberalism as governments and commercial enterprises merely encouraged people to get back to the shops to spend.

Originality – The original contribution of this paper is the strength and depth of empirical data into the Covid-19 pandemic, specifically the lockdown. Additionally, the synthesis of empirical data with the novel theoretical framework of transcendental materialism presents an original and unique perspective on Covid-19.

Keywords Covid-19; neoliberalism; consumerism; politics; social change; future; transcendental materialism.

Paper type – Research paper

Introduction

The legitimacy and the reputation of neoliberal capitalist political economy has been severely undermined since the 2008 financial crisis. Critical accounts of the system have burgeoned in the years since, exposing further its role in generating many challenges now facing humanity (Stiegler, 2013; Dupuy, 2014; Streeck, 2016; Žižek, 2017). Despite such frequent and

persistent criticism, the system has remained stubbornly resistant to wholesale change; it continues to promote market solutions to intractable problems and valorises consumer spending both as economic necessity and the source of subjective satisfaction. While the absence of viable political economic alternatives, and the belief that 'there is no alternative' (Fisher, 2009, p.8) prove beneficial in this regard, the system itself has also shown its ability at navigating and governing through recent crises that have simultaneously exposed its systemic weaknesses and contradictions.

In the immediate wake of the transatlantic banking crisis Peck (2010) used the analogy of the living dead to describe neoliberalism's 'dead, but dominant' post-crisis incarnation. In the aftermath of this crisis event, riots and political protests rippled across several Western states. Some, such as Occupy and the Indignados, were more articulate and vocal in their opposition to neoliberal capitalism. But no political entity proved capable of seizing the opportunity to bring about radical and lasting change to socio-economic life in the West (Winlow et al, 2015; Telford and Wistow, 2019). Indeed, in the years since, despite further protest movements, the neoliberal regime was re-asserted with considerable vigour across many Western economies through policies of fiscal consolidation and wage depression (Mitchell and Fazi, 2017); despite its zombified state, neoliberal capitalism's 'limbs are still moving, and many of the defensive reflexes seem to be working too' (Peck, 2010, p.109).

In the final pages of their book *Rethinking Social Exclusion*, Winlow and Hall (2013) speculate on the persistence of neoliberal capitalism and the impasse that has enabled its continuation. With no alternative vision forthcoming from parliamentary politics or protest-based movements, they suggest that the only means by which the system may now be succeeded is through a catastrophic global event:

...we need a... transformative event to occur across the West, an event that allows us to see the absurdity of the present order and the absolute necessity of creating a more just and equitable world (p.174)

As the year 2019 ended, news began to circulate that a new strain of coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2, or Covid-19) had been detected in China with potentially global consequences. The initial

epicentre of the outbreak, the Chinese city of Wuhan, was put under lockdown on the 23rd January 2020 in the hope of curbing the spread of the virus. However, two months later, Western European states had become engulfed in the crisis, leading to a raft of unprecedented lockdown and social distancing measures in an attempt to reduce the transmission rate, alongside increased state expenditure to manage the economic impacts of the virus - the kind of monetary policies that the era of austerity had declared an impossibility. This crisis - just like the financial crisis before it - has exposed many of the fallacies of neoliberal orthodoxy upon which its continued presence has depended, such as the impotence of the state in the face of global markets. With lacerations appearing in its ideological support structure, the system finds itself once again in a vulnerable and exposed condition, offering potential glimmers of the possibility for a post neo-liberal world.

In this article, we tentatively consider what this means for the future as Western liberal democracies attempt to re-build their beleaguered economies following this global catastrophic 'event'. To assist our endeavours, we captured the views of individuals during the UK lockdown via an online survey (N=305) and data gathered from Facebook forums. The data collection instruments were designed and used to gather individuals' experiences during lockdown; but to also capture their feelings about the future and the possibility of change in the wake of the pandemic. Indeed, we discuss and analyse their views against the political and economic context outlined briefly above. In doing so, we draw upon the incipient transcendental materialist framework (Hall and Winlow, 2015), which has been developed and applied to different contexts (Whitehead, 2015; Lloyd, 2017), to make sense of our participants' experiences of change throughout lockdown and their feelings regarding the future.

The article is divided into four substantive sections. Following this introduction, we outline in more detail both the Covid-19 epidemic in a British context and the theoretical framework that we apply to our data. The second section briefly exposes the methodology used to gather the data. Following this, the third substantive section explicates some of our findings and is divided thematically to address the core issues that emerged during our analysis, specifically anxiety and atomisation, hope for the future, as well as consumerism and attachment to the

‘old normal’. The fourth and final part of the article presents some conclusions from the fusion of our data and theoretical arguments.

Covid-19 and Lockdown

Throughout history, viral pandemics have generated significant death tolls and considerable social turbulence. In 1918 the Spanish influenza, perhaps considered the worst pandemic in recent history, killed around 40 million people globally while the more recent swine flu pandemic (2009) killed around 250,000 worldwide. Although many scientists persistently warned about the potential for another pandemic (Žižek, 2020), some nation states were seemingly unprepared for the Covid-19 outbreak. Widely believed to have originated in the Wuhan province of China in late 2019, the pathogen spread across the globe with remarkable speed. The first reported death in China occurred on January 11th 2020 and the first UK case was recorded on January 31st. At the time of writing, there have been over 16.2 million reported cases of Covid-19 and 648,000 recorded deaths worldwide.

As the virus spread, a state of panic enveloped UK society. Stockpiling of items from supermarkets proliferated. The vulnerability of global supply chains was exposed and the ‘just-in-time’ food delivery model was thus unable to cope with consumer demand. Photographs of empty store shelves were widely shared on mainstream and social media. Items such as paracetamol, toilet paper, fresh fruit, flour and dried pasta were in scarce supply. Reports that some people were using their arms to sweep large quantities of items into shopping trolleys were commonplace (Wilson, 2020). Meanwhile, some nurses, recently reclassified as ‘key workers’, were unable to buy essentials after lengthy shifts at work (BBC, 2020a) and many disabled people struggled to acquire vital medical supplies (Ryan and Marsh, 2020).

Although some politicians and commentators questioned the efficacy of a lockdown due to the disputed severity of Covid-19 and the detrimental societal and economic impact (Žižek, 2020), others suggested the pathogen to be the most dangerous respiratory virus since the 1918 Spanish influenza pandemic (Ferguson *et al.*, 2020). UK experts indicated that a governmental intervention strategy such as a lockdown was essential to slow the spread of a

virus without a known cure; estimates stressed that otherwise most of the population could be infected and up to 500,000 would die (Ferguson *et al.*, 2020). Although other European countries such as Italy and Spain enacted lockdown measures and shut borders in early March, the UK government delayed its decision and offered incoherent measures, including ‘encouraging’ people to avoid pubs and restaurants, but not officially ordering them to close.

However, social distancing measures were eventually encouraged from March 16th and a full lockdown was imposed on March 23rd when the virus reproduction (R) rate was estimated by scientists to be around 2.6 (Jarvis *et al.*, 2020). Civil liberties were curtailed to an extent unseen since World War Two, with huge implications for social life. Schools, pubs, cafes, restaurants and ‘non-essential’ shops closed, and people were ordered to stay at home. Only ‘key workers’ were permitted to go to work. Venturing outdoors was limited to one hour of exercise and shopping for essentials such as food and medical supplies. Suddenly, neoliberal shibboleths including incremental change were quickly dispensed with and significant state intervention in the economy was enacted in order to support businesses and workers (Žižek, 2020) - the Conservative government committed itself to paying 80% of furloughed employees’ wages, up to £2,500 per month for an initial three months. Mortgage freezes were arranged with banks and self-employed workers received government assistance. Even right-wing commentators encouraged the government to temporarily embrace socialism in order to save capitalism (Evans-Pritchard, 2020).

Primrose *et al.*, (2020, p.20) suggest that the state’s response embodied a ‘post-political logic of governance’, since they offered an individualised message that negated the political economy – stay at home; protect the National Health Service (NHS); wash your hands; and maintain social distancing. This was done to avoid exposing the weakness of the NHS after a decade of austerity measures and repeated rounds of ‘efficiency savings’, as well as vulnerable supply chains responsible for the shortage of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). Ultimately, the response was described by Horton (2020, p.1022) as a ‘national scandal’ - the government failed to follow the World Health Organisation’s (WHO) advice to maximise testing, trace, isolate and quarantine, meaning that many peoples’ lives were needlessly put at risk. At the same time, lockdown meant most people were severed from family, friends and

work colleagues which, as our data indicates, provided space to imagine a different future while longing for the coherence and semblance of neoliberal normality.

Throughout lockdown the UK's Covid-19 death toll reached the highest in Europe. Over 300 health and social care workers died as a result of the virus (Devlin, 2020). Lockdown measures were implicated in reduced treatment for illnesses, such as cancer, as well as anticipated increases in mental ill health, domestic violence and suicide. As global production was halted, economic growth dwindled. Transport, tourism and education suffered more than most (Ranald, 2020). As the UK government began to lift lockdown restrictions at the end of May, media coverage of Covid-19 reported the threat of an impending economic crash and potentially the worst recession in recorded history (Elliott, 2020). Indeed, some suggested that lockdown restrictions were eased in order to restart the economy and in the hope of mitigating the worst effects of an oncoming recession (Wren-Lewis, 2020).

The cumulative effects of Covid-19 abruptly interrupted established economic, political and social life in Britain and appear to be setting in motion a period of profound and 'potentially traumatizing social change' (Sztompka, 2000, p.452). Our data suggests that this traumatising interruption generated space for personal introspection and reflection, particularly for some of those that reported facing challenging circumstances through the loss of employment or financial difficulties. Some participants displayed an incipient sense of critical perspective on pre-lockdown life, matched with a recognition that this represents a point from which social and economic change could be ignited. Others reported feelings of anger at the British government's response to the crisis and the policy context of austerity that preceded it. However, desire for aspects of pre-lockdown life were in strong evidence, particularly for conspicuous consumption. To aid in the interpretation and understanding of the various complexities displayed in the views and feelings of the participants, which we explicate shortly, we utilise the concepts of transcendental materialism and the 'event'. This is where the paper now turns.

Transcendental Materialism and the 'Event'

Coined by Johnston (2008) and informed by the work of Lacan and Žižek, transcendental materialism offers a dialectical account of the relationship between subjectivity and the world we inhabit (also see Hall, 2012a). Rather than understanding subjectivity as the Cartesian point of conscious thought or the postmodern belief in discursive subjects (see Ellis, 2016; Lloyd, 2018), transcendental materialism proposes that subjectivity emerges at a much earlier stage and is in fact characterised by a void, an emptiness at its core. The subject emerges into the realm of the Real, an unsymbolised world of incomprehensible stimuli that leaves the subject anxious and terrified. In order to exist in the world, the subject must pass from this terrifying state of nature into a coherent state of culture through the solicitation of an external Symbolic Order. This realm offers a set of symbols, codes, rituals and an ideological matrix that equips the subject with the coherency and semblance to make sense of the world around us (Johnston, 2008; Hall and Winlow, 2015). As the individual is a product of the 'signification system in which the human subject is inescapably located' (Whitehead, 2015, p. 301), it has a significant impact on both social relations as well as beliefs, desires, language and values (Lloyd, 2017).

The transcendental materialist subject and its external world exist in dialectical unity. The subject solicits the external Symbolic Order to bring constancy, coherence and meaning but also acts in the world in a way that shapes and impacts on one's surroundings and environment (Winlow and Hall, 2013; Ellis, 2016). As the human brain is malleable and hard-wired for plasticity, the Symbolic Order's ideological symbols so too become hard-wired in the brain's neurological circuits – ideology shapes our very materiality which is then reflected back into the world through our actions (Wakeman, 2018). Neoliberal ideology of competition, individualism, status and display attached to consumer commodities ensures 'the mad dance of identification' (Johnston, 2008, p. 12) occurs along these lines. An alternative Symbolic Order based on trust, co-operation and reciprocity would fashion a different form of subjectivity (Whitehead, 2015; Lloyd, 2018; Raymen, 2018). The key point for this paper is that subjectivity is not fixed and can be transformed but it is intimately connected to ideology.

For this transformation to occur, the subject must undergo a traumatic encounter with the Real and 'traverse the fantasy' of ideology (Žižek, 2014) in order to solicit an alternative

Symbolic Order. Neoliberal ideology increasingly fails to provide coherence to the lives of many falling through the cracks and existing in the shadow of its Real (inequality, insecurity, homelessness, violence, addiction), yet the absence of a coherent political and economic alternative means the subject will cling to a discredited and dysfunctional ideology - what Johnston (2008, p.175) calls 'deaptation' - rather than risk a traumatic break from it. Accompanying the Real and Symbolic registers is the Imaginary. This denotes the subject's idealised and internalised notions of the self (Raymen, 2018). As our findings display, consumerism, for example, is closely associated with the subject's Imaginary order. It generates a subjective desire to move up the social structure and improve one's economic position in order to obtain the commodified objects of pseudo-pleasure associated with the perceived 'good life' (Briggs, 2013), which the subject actively solicits (Lloyd, 2018). Although consumerism posits this as individualistically liberating, by failing to provide fixed anchoring points to negate the void, it intensifies the transcendental materialist subject's sense of absence.

Returning to Winlow and Hall's (2013) quotation in the introduction, it has been suggested that a traumatic 'event' could act as the catalyst for the passage from one Symbolic Order to another. Contemporary philosophers and critical social scientists in this field often identify climate change as the global 'event' that could engender an alternative political economic configuration (Badiou, 2007; Žižek, 2014). On a smaller scale, Temple (2016) suggests that desistance amongst offenders is more successful following an 'event' where the subject traverses the fantasy from one life to another; a new job or relationship can act as the catalyst to undertake the painful work of shedding one Symbolic Order in favour of another. With its consideration of how both subjective and ideological change may occur, we suggest that transcendental materialism provides a useful framework within which to situate the discussion of our participants' feelings about the future. Does Covid-19 represent an 'event' that can propel the movement to an alternative future? Does an alternative Symbolic Order appear in the ruins of lockdown to enable the subjective break from neoliberal ideology? Before we explore this further through our data, we turn briefly to the study's aims and methodology.

Methodology

Aims and methodology

This article draws upon data from an online survey (n=305) based on lockdown and perceptions of Covid-19¹, coupled with data gleaned from discussions and debates which occurred in one Facebook group set up for UK updates on Covid-19 with 18,215 members². The study aimed to examine the social, psychological and emotional impact of lockdown. The research considered how lockdown was experienced by individuals and their families, perceptions on strategies such as social distancing and self-isolation, and how this affected people and their everyday life. Key to this was gleaning participants' perceptions of governmental performance and views on the media as this also played a part in how they felt during lockdown. Lastly, we were interested in whether participants had made reflections on what Covid-19 may mean for society in the future.

The experience of lockdown has many different elements: lack of contact with those outside the home, the conditions of domestic homes, number of people living in that space, relationships between those living in that space along with more standardised variables such as socio-economic status, gender, age and health status. In this way, our online survey needed to capture this carefully without being too insensitive to these circumstances. This project made use of a 52 question semi-structured online survey which was split into five sections. The first section contained general questions about Covid-19, such as if people were worried; how long they had been in lockdown; how often they talked about it with others. The second section explored social distancing, self-isolation and what measures participants took to avoid contracting the virus. The next section covered the specific experience of lockdown and how this had impacted upon the participants. This was followed by a section containing questions on perceptions of the media and government. The last section contained speculative questions about the future.

¹ This data comes from a wider dataset which composes of 984 completed surveys from 59 different countries and similar discussions and debates in ten coronavirus Facebook groups around the world (see Briggs, 2020 for more detailed description).

² As of 4th June 2020.

All survey and Facebook discussion participants were informed of the study's aims, that they were not required to answer all the questions, and to be honest with responses given the study's consideration of anonymity and confidentiality. The study did not gather personal identifiable information from participants nor their precise locations. The survey took between 15 to 18 minutes to complete and received positive comments, including *"I think the survey is quite comprehensive"*, *"would be interested in seeing the results. Especially the impact on the environment and whether people can see the waste we've done to the planet"* and *"very valuable survey-Thank you for your efforts!"*. The survey was live for nearly two months from 30th March 2020 to 26th May 2020 during which time the UK was under lockdown.

Sampling

Given the uniqueness of the situation and the imposed circumstances of lockdown, we utilised LinkedIn and Facebook to advertise the survey; a practice that has proved successful in other studies (see Conroy *et al.*, 2012; Bennetts *et al.*, 2016; Gu *et al.*, 2016). In order to both advertise the survey and gather additional views from potential participants, we also joined an open coronavirus Facebook forum for UK residents. As other studies have done (see Aeney-Perreten *et al.*, 2015) we put up reminder posts in this forum to complete the survey, particularly during peak times of use: Friday evenings, Saturday mornings and Sunday evenings.

When we posted general debate questions on Facebook, we made participants aware of the survey and that their responses would help us discuss elements of the survey. Thereafter, critical debate ensued which also acted as a means of recognised data collection (de Villiers, 2010) and which permitted political expression (Kushin and Kitchener, 2009; Leigh, 2018). The survey was further advertised at the end of the discussion. The researcher was consistently neutral with responses and exchanges were respectful to other users.

Given that this study was measuring the experience of lockdown and people's feelings during this period, there are undoubtedly some limitations. Cognisant of the tendency for online surveys to generate low response levels (Paris, 2013) we were proactive in obtaining a sample, hence the regularity of posts and discussions in the Facebook forum.

Sample demography of UK residents

The UK resident sample were made up of 220 women (73%) and 81 men (27%). This corresponds with other studies on gender and Facebook use that found women tend to use the social networking site more than men (Biernatowska *et al.*, 2017; Alnajat *et al.*, 2019). Three quarters of the sample were aged between 30 and 60 years of age (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 – Age Group

Age group	19 or under	20-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60-69	70-79	80+	Total
Number	4	35	73	85	71	26	11	0	305
Percentage	1%	12%	24%	28%	23%	9%	3%	0	100%

Two thirds were employed through companies (67%, n=205), 37 were self-employed, 12 were students and 28 were retired. Their professions varied from NHS worker to school chef; from consultant to care worker; from company director to company receptionist; and from journalist to travel agent. There were 23 people who reported being unemployed (8%), 10 of whom had lost their jobs during the pandemic. The sample tended to live with other people, either with family (n=138) or partners (n=96), and 40 lived alone. They came from equally varied urban, suburban and rural areas and only 10% (n=31) had no outdoor living space. For the purposes of this paper, we set the participants feelings about change and the future against their initial views on Covid-19, the government's response and media representations. We now turn to the empirical findings.

Anxiety, atomisation and the curtailment of 'normal'

With the advent of lockdown and subsequent closure of shops, businesses and transport, most of our participants had become 'quite worried' (n=103) or 'very worried' (n=169) about Covid-19 (totalling n=272, 89%). At the time, this anxiety was reflected in the possibilities of contracting the virus (n=269, 88%) as well as concern for family or friends who could be vulnerable to it (n=268, 88%). Indeed, nearly a quarter said they knew someone who had died

from the virus.³ Perhaps because of continuous media coverage, our sample too found themselves talking about Covid-19, its risk and impact either 'quite a lot' (n=99) or 'all the time' (n=62). While only six people revealed they had been tested for the virus with one confirmed positive, nearly a quarter (n=71, 23%) believed that after 'having read and researched what the symptoms may be' they felt they had already had it. As the supermarkets started to empty of items with the advent of lockdown, 41 reported panic buying (13%) due to feeling anxious about the prospect of not having enough food and essential household items.

Our study found that the majority of participants reported following government guidelines as 98% (299) were washing their hands more often. However, masks were not obligatory and only 'recommended' in 'crowded places' (Stewart, 2020); nearly a quarter (n=74, 24%) of our sample were wearing gloves and 45 wore masks (15%). A further measure of this sudden suspension of normality concerned advice on social distancing, even if there was much ambiguity attached to it. Personal anxieties were evident in our sample - nearly three quarters (n=225, 73%) said they 'got nervy if someone near them sneezed or coughed' while a greater number (n=266, 87%) said they 'crossed the road to avoid someone coming within a metre of them'.

The sudden withdrawal from established interaction coupled with stringent measures on social life forced people into their homes with limitations placed on movement. Some felt this would result in a "reduction in materialism", how "materialism didn't matter" and people would "see what's important so less materialism". In this respect, the pandemic has provided space for people to 'think about the (non)sense of their predicament' (Žižek, 2020, p. 57) and perhaps contemplate priorities and alternative futures. However, our data also indicates that the lockdown reinforced a significant commitment to consumption and thus an attachment to the existing Symbolic Order - many reported increased TV viewing, internet usage, online shopping, gaming, Netflix and social media usage (n=243, 80%)⁴.

³ We are not able to discuss how much coronavirus played a part in someone's death but simply refer to it as a contributing cause given that many people who have died thus far tend to be elderly, vulnerable and/or have underlying health conditions.

⁴ Responses mentioned in the qualitative comment box about 'how do you spend your time during lockdown?'

Indeed, UK residents' daily internet usage time increased from an average of 3.5 hours in 2019 to 4 hours a day during lockdown (BBC, 2020c). Increased online time was reflected in a growth in spending online. One study of 2,000 UK residents found that nearly two thirds (60%, n=1,200) had spent more money during lockdown (PFS, 2020). Undoubtedly, this was related to food and grocery purchases but 19% (n=380) said they bought more healthcare products while in lockdown, and 11% (n=220) bought additional technological goods and 11% (n=220) purchased extra beauty and cosmetics respectively while 6% (n=120) had indulged in 'luxury products'. Netflix subscriptions also increased by 16 million during lockdown (BBC, 2020b) as did the number of livestream gamers from 2.3 million in January to 4.2 million in April (BBC, 2020c). While nearly two thirds (n=192, 63%) of our participants reported using their mobile phones more during lockdown, just over half (n=166, 54%) watched more films and/or TV series. There were bouts of 'depressive hedonia' (Fisher, 2009, p. 21), that is, an inability to do anything but seek gratification within existing consumer markets amongst some individuals, like this self-employed man: "I work 4 hours, sleep, drink [alcohol] and smoke weed lol, and spend too many hours on social media". Increased consumption of alcohol was reported by over a quarter of our sample during lockdown (n=81, 27%).

Almost all who possessed employment and caring/playing/teaching responsibilities were still able to maintain some of their hobbies. Few people reported trying new activities like learning an instrument, a language, or new cooking recipes. In this respect, the deprivation of 'normal life' was not as complete as might be assumed; 'normal' did not go away entirely and many seemed to try to retain as many aspects of 'normality' as possible in anticipation of a resumption of established social life. We argue then that most participants sought to 'find aspects of their normal life' in the current Symbolic Order for both comfort and coherency:

"I am mainly doing my full time job as best as I can whilst working from home (usually end up working longer hours that I would normally); Cooking more meals (before lockdown I would buy breakfast and lunch to eat in the office and only cook one meal per day at home); watch films, TV or YouTube videos; Exercise (30 mins per day); I have started journaling again and find myself browsing for clothes online thinking 'I'll buy these when this is all over.'"

What is important to note here is the visualisation of the self in a 'post-coronavirus' future which bears the same features as pre-lockdown social life. Similarly, a male in his 30s said:

"I am doing pretty much the same things, except the social interaction is limited to my co-habitants and my two neighbours. Much more internet use, more media consumption..."

Although many possessed the comforts of the old normality, almost half (n=140, 46%) were 'more anxious' during lockdown in comparison to those who felt 'the same as before' (n=100, 33%) and those who said they were 'less anxious' (n=65, 21%). Some indicated in more qualitative responses that this was mostly related to caring responsibilities of children, the elderly and disabled; but was also related to the emotional feelings provoked by the lockdown with many conceding feelings such as increased loneliness (n=107, 35%) and added pressure (n=120, 33%). The temporary *time out of joint* (Fisher, 2009) made many people reflect on their work, families, saving money, and making themselves busy with things that really mattered to 'them as individuals'. "Time to re-evaluate" and "I have time to myself" were common responses:

"More "me time", no commuting, no spending time in the office, no travelling to visit friends, spending less money, spending time on things I care about (exercise, creativity, meditation), appreciating the simple things (good food, nature), getting perspective on things that do/don't matter, getting a clearer sense of how I want my life to be post-lockdown."

For these reasons, the lockdown was also conceived as an infringement to the subject's freedoms: "Not being able to shop where and when you want" and "lack of freedom to go wherever I want, do whatever I want to do, to socialise, limiting food shopping to once a week, lack of fresh fruit and veg" were exemplary. Consumer distractions ameliorated the subject's anxiety and numbed the potential for a deep subjective depression, forestalling a confrontation with the Real (Winlow and Hall, 2013). Others in precarious situations and thus

in closer proximity to capitalism's Real had more pressing concerns. This woman in her 50s was worried about her sudden unemployment:

"[I am] making job applications and hoping after the lockdown, I would get a job. Listening less to any news on Covid-19 as it is depressing. Trying to think positive, preventing negative thoughts to wear me down."

Equally, the experience of lockdown for some heightened feelings of misery and dejection, seemingly amplifying pre-existing anxieties: "[Lockdown feels like] isolation, depression, unable to shop for clothes" said one while another said "not getting paid and really difficult to find a job". Indeed, for those in precarious circumstances before lockdown, the new circumstances multiplied prior anxieties, including for these two unemployed people:

"No routine, no structure, no education, no drive, no desire."

"Don't know; it's the same as being poor, so life pretty much the same as lockdown."

A few people became more anxious as their support was severed from healthcare institutions, such as this man in his 30s: "I can't get access to my treatments and my hospital appointments have been cancelled". The advent of lockdown clearly disrupted routines and heightened anxieties, whilst others retreated into the comfort of existing consumer habits in the existing Symbolic Order. As the next section suggests, a considerable theme prevalent in participants' experiences was the government and media responses to Covid-19.

Systemic inadequacies, frustration and social resentment

While lockdown appeared to generate various pressures, it also put the spotlight on the government response and plans for a safe passage back to the semblance of a coherent Symbolic Order to mitigate the subject's sense of lack. Daily government briefings were complemented by media cross-questioning and this aggravated some participants. Many did not trust either institution. When asked about the coverage of viral transmission, its symptoms and effects on people, nearly one third said "they didn't believe anything" (n=90,

30%) while nearly 40% were sceptical about what they were presented with (n=120, 39%). This nagging doubt meant that nearly two thirds (n=189, 62%) looked up information from different sources to verify something they had been told or were shown.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, one third (n=103, 34%) felt data related to 'new cases' and 'deaths' were '100% inaccurate' and one fifth (n=60, 20%) said they were 'unsure' about such statistics and even then nearly half said 'it was difficult to say but there was some accuracy' (n=141, 46%). Typically:

"[The statistics are] Completely distorted. The media pounce on any death of a young or healthy person and blame coronavirus, yet there have been recent examples like the 21 year old girl that died - apparently the coroner assumed it was coronavirus but it hasn't been confirmed. Yet the media have clung onto the case to strike fear into young people, which isn't bad if it means they are careful but the media are definitely playing with people to make out the situation is worse than it is at times."

Some of our participants directly related this to a 'mistrustful government'. Typical responses were "Depends which media. Lots of bad science. Alarmist. Tory bias. Others were more critical:

"Disgraceful propping up of a weak government by the predominantly Tory press. Manipulation of the people. Talking about the lifting of lockdown to encourage people to break the rules I suspect to divert from the government's failures by blaming the people for not obeying rules. Vilifying the few that do break the rules rather than propping up those who are struggling to keep them. 10 years of underfunding the NHS left it already depleted...."

There was unanimous anger about underfunded services, a lack of strategic planning for the possibility of a pandemic and that decisive action was not taken quicker to reduce the risk to the vulnerable. Some made responses which indicated how the press were uncritical of the government's decisions and this forged the view that they were collaborating together:

“The British press is a joke, and is incapable of properly criticising the government. It is incredibly clear to me that the British response was too little and FAR too late. Over 20,000 deaths in weeks, when we could have been tracking and tracing and prevented this - not to mention that half of the problem is that our public services have been completely gutted by neoliberalisation and cuts. But that's not the impression you get from the press - isn't Boris brave, gosh what a hard task they have, maybe there's not quite enough PPE but that's probably not a problem...”.

Some politically articulate respondents acknowledged the neoliberal decimation of public services, particularly during the austerity era, which generated anger and dissatisfaction at the UK's ability to adequately prepare for and weather the pandemic. This data indicates incredulity at government and media narratives which could be taken as a sign that events such as Covid-19 require a better system of government and media scrutiny. Material improvements in public services, job security and protection, and supply chains were considered more important than symbolic gestures such as clapping. In the Facebook forums, between endless references to returning to McDonalds, nail bars, Nandos, the pub, and therefore the coherency of the existing Symbolic Order, there were hidden references to the unrecognised sacrifices.

Ezzy: “I had four jobs before covid but quit the other in a charity in care sector...Been with covid for 11 weeks now I'm still ill...no SSP because I did not work enough hours in two of them, all I got was letters and calls and emails trying to initiate disciplinary actions against me for been ill too long not following absence procedures...before I got ill they (head office) called us 'heroes' for being key workers...I no longer want to live in UK...I am from Spain...when they called people heroes obviously they needed them working while they managed the mess from the safety of their homes...taught me there are no limits for hypocrisy in society”.

For some, the lockdown and coronavirus exposed, as one participant suggested, the “negative aspects of how we live, like zero-hour contracts, the welfare system”. However, inequalities and precarious working conditions were seemingly forgotten by some, for whom a collective desire for consumer commodities took precedent:

Debbie: "I miss trying on clothing. But then I guess my clothes would still fit if I hadn't been a pig all lockdown 😊".

Sophie: "I miss getting my nails done, or going for cocktails."

Baz: "McDonald's restaurant eating all day 🍷🍷🍷"

Neoliberalism's systemic inadequacies force low-paid workers such as Ezzy to do three paid jobs just to get by (Lloyd, 2018) and the pandemic further revealed these inequalities. As one respondent put it: "We are paying for years of austerity, meaning any type of management of threat/pandemic was going to be reactive, rather than proactive". To galvanise this frustration and social anger, the Conservative government and media made warlike references to 'win the battle against coronavirus', all of which would be possible if people stayed at home and clapped for the NHS:

"Bigotry and pettiness from the usual little England, climate change denying, xenophobic Brexit imbeciles. Orwellian bullshit like The Weekly Clap and populist, chauvinistic horseshit about fighting a war. Constant reference to WWII and faux national unity. Mass delusion and elevation of all NHS staff to God-like status".

Although the British government enacted a raft of support measures that lacerated neoliberal ideology and opened the door to marginal monetary policies (Mitchell and Fazi, 2017), its preparedness for the crisis was underplayed until eventually calls were made for volunteers to bolster the depleted health service. Like Ezzy, more than half a million people put themselves forward to assist in supporting the health services. A crisis that the government were seemingly underprepared for and that was reported to have been poorly managed, raised discontent within the population which, alongside the visible limitations of neoliberal ideology, enabled alternative visions of a different future to emerge.

Discrepant solidarity and hope for a new future

As well as anger and grievance, some respondents reported a sense of togetherness and community through the experience of lockdown and the potential for positive change as a result:

“Communities are coming together more, people are volunteering more to help one another and hopefully that will continue, people are learning to appreciate the simple things in life, people are getting their priorities straight.”

“It brings people together help us restore our faith in humanity and the kindness from the hearts of strangers helping those who are vulnerable.”

“I hope people see the value of migrants, NHS, international cooperation, the pointlessness of consumerism, the need to protect the environment, how we need to work with nature not against it.”

Primrose et al (2020, p.17) note how the lockdown generated optimism about an alternative world which mirrored sentiment felt during the 2008 financial crisis and thus embodied ‘a sense of *déjà vu*’. However, there was a feeling that this could prompt social change through:

“Increased connectivity between people in the community and in family and friends. A value realignment from money and material things to connection and contribution...volunteers supporting the vulnerable and raised awareness of the importance of clean air and quieter cities.”

However, this simultaneously provoked a sense of scepticism about how change could realistically be achieved, echoing Fisher’s (2009, p.21) term ‘reflexive impotence’. Essentially, some acknowledged the scale of the problems we face, such as myriad inequalities and climate change; but expressed both a sense of powerlessness and believed change was happening too late:

“I do hope I'm wrong and that we change but clapping (for NHS staff) and volunteering is not new. These are cheap and ‘easy’. Radical change is hard. Like climate change. If we want to change, we have to make the tough decisions.”

Similarly, other respondents cynically noted how the pandemic had:

“Just shown me how selfish people are, panic buying for example and not thinking of others.”

“Short term change, yes. Coming together. Long term, no...We are all a bit shit so why would it change”.

Desire for change and an alternative future were clearly articulated in responses. However, the collective vision of an alternative future that can sustain the libidinal investment of subjectivity, lacked coherence and therefore rendered some respondents cynical or unable to act. Although Covid-19 appears to be an event capable of ushering in a dialectical shift to an alternative Symbolic Order, individualised perceptions of ‘slowing down’ or rethinking priorities is not enough. Indeed, a further barrier also exists.

‘Old normal’ and ‘new normal’: A marriage made in cyberspace

Aspiration for a reconfigured future, an alternative to neoliberal consumer capitalism, is undone by the strength of subjective desire for existing consumer lifestyles. Libidinal desire runs deep (Johnston, 2008) and the solicitation of a Symbolic Order ‘traps’ the subject within the contours and outlines of the dominant configuration (Hall, 2012b). In this way, digital platforms enabled respondents to maintain ever-present connections with consumer and leisure lifestyles throughout lockdown. Whilst lockdown provoked subjective reflection, it failed to eradicate the craving for the ‘old normal’, as this Facebook debate highlights:

Chris: “To be honest it [lockdown and the coronavirus] makes you realise what you don’t need in your life anymore and make you realise what really is important.”

Yet, when asked what is *not needed anymore*, the statement stumbles, and with the help of another user, Henry, Chris clumsily alludes to the things he supposedly realised he didn't need:

Researcher: "So what is not needed anymore??"

Henry: "You don't need much to enjoy life!"

Researcher: "So what is the secret to this enjoyment then?"

Henry: "Everything is enjoying. Everything now. Netflix, unlimited internet. Everything."

Chris: "Everything, especially takeaways lol!"

Chris would accept a 'new normal' if it contained the internet, takeaways and thus the depressive hedonia (Fisher, 2009) inherent in the 'old normal'. He consciously discusses change as his old routine has been replaced with an alternative, yet there are enough symbolisms of the 'old normal' to neutralise the desire for more fundamental change. Warm feelings of social collaboration, environmental healing and work-from-home possibilities tended to be met with a discrepant solidarity and scepticism. The vision of an alternative future, an alternative Symbolic Order, was too personalised, fragmented and lacked coherence:

"We will just get back to our greedy selfish over-indulgent lives when this is done. So no long term benefits."

While many of the industries supporting commercial subservience and personal indulgence were physically shut, they were still digitally available and thus able to satisfy consumer desires. The transition from old normal via a lockdown to new normal was therefore bound by an online commercial marriage, as revealed in debates on Facebook:

Kerry: "I can't wait to eat a Big Mac."

Researcher: "Did you go much pre lockdown?"

Kerry: "Every now and again..."

Clare: "It's open now!"

Kerry: "One near me isn't 😞"

Clare: "Ones near me opened today.. I'm defo getting one today x"

Some people even camped outside McDonalds in anticipation of it reopening (Kindred, 2020).

Kylie: "I miss eating out with Carol and getting our nails done 😊"

Researcher: "Nail bars still not open yet?"

Kylie: "No 😞 lol"

Susie: "No some open Kylie. I was supposed to get mine done today. But need to wait till Friday now."

Kylie: "Haven't been for 4 months I grew them out nice then they all broke 😊 sods law."

These exchanges show the strong commitment to narcissistic individualism and consumer comforts. Reopening McDonald's ushered in a collective stampede towards the 'old normal', reinforcing the doubt some participants identified about the possibility of change. People remained libidinally invested in the old Symbolic Order of consumer society and unable to make the traumatic break required to move towards a new future. This was once again confirmed in Facebook forums where we asked similar questions pertaining to societal change:

Liz: "Eventually I think most will return to how it was. I don't think this is all going to go on forever. People are itching for normality".

Researcher: "So it is just a question of time before we return to the 'old normal'? You see no big changes as a result?"

Liz: "I think eventually, yes things will get to normal because people are stubborn. Already this lockdown has failed hasn't it, in terms of what we can control. Put it this way... if McDonald's restaurants were open for inside dining I reckon it would be packed out...There's only so far a "pandemic" will work to change us forever. It will wear very thin!"

The subjective possibility of change was further impeded by political and commercial endorsements to return to the shops; to bring back Premier League football; to get people spending; to restart the economy:

“Now it is like back to normal as soon as possible. Look at how they are pushing for the football restart this is all to do with money and business. Today the shops have opened and there are queues all over the place. I think there will be a second spike, there might even be one in China now, and what will we do?” (Pete)

“I was secretly but nervously hoping that this would be the moment when the system was brought down and we saw some meaningful change but seeing people out of lockdown, pollution is returning to china, people are queuing outside Primark and I don’t think things will change. I think things needed to be destroyed to be rebuilt up again. It didn’t change and it won’t”. (Gema)

Streeck (2016) indicates that the current configuration of capitalism services markets at the expense of the public; much like the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis the government have insisted on returning to business as usual. Boris Johnson encouraged the nation to spend as much as possible to assist in the return to the ‘old normal’ (Wilcock, 2020). Wanting to do ‘old things’ was a regular refrain. No new alternative presented itself and there was no coherence to any systemic substitute to consumer capitalism. Consequently, there was no subjective realignment, no ‘traversing the fantasy’ to an alternative Symbolic Order:

Danny: “I don’t want it to [change]! I want to get back to normal ASAP!”

Researcher: “Do you miss the old normal? What about it?”

Danny: “Spending my weekends with my family and friends doing nice things like going for food, going bowling, nights out, theme parks, may never get that back again.”

Conclusion: Sceptical revolutions

In this paper, we have tried to show how potential social change was imagined by 305 UK residents during the UK lockdown. Limited by the conditions of the lockdown, we opted for

an anonymous online survey and bolstered this data by navigating Facebook forums and taking part in debates on Covid-19 and the UK government's response. Žižek (2020, p.41) argued that "it is a sad fact that we need a catastrophe to be able to rethink the very basic features of the society in which we live". Our data, though with its limitations regarding the sample's demographic, indicates that for many Covid-19 represents an opportunity to evaluate our individual and collective priorities and envision an alternative future. Many people demonstrated 'new hope' for change to what they saw as a politically impotent, unequal and ultimately flawed social system: their subjective dreams revolved around communal solidarity, a greener planet and a fairer society. The pandemic certainly appears to have exposed both the flaws in neoliberal ideology and its inability to adequately handle the crisis. In utilising insights from transcendental materialism (Johnston, 2008; Winlow and Hall, 2013), we explored the possibility that the Covid-19 pandemic could represent the 'event' that provides the catalyst for change at both a societal and subjective level. As transcendental materialist subjects wedded to the Symbolic Order of neoliberal consumer capital, our respondents demonstrated anxiety as the lockdown suspended regular routines. The shadow of the traumatic Real began to emerge, but digital entertainment and online shopping provided a bridge between pre- and post-lockdown. Desire for change was deemed naïve or too utopian by some and further numbed by submission to consumerism evidenced through increased time on the internet, social media, and expenditure on online shopping. This produced pangs for the 'old normal' and represents what we term 'old futures in disguise'. This ensured the traumatic work of abandoning an outdated or dysfunctional ideology was not required, since a *deaptive* Symbolic Order is more comforting than an absent set of symbols and codes.

As an 'event', Covid-19 has so far failed to rock the depth structures of neoliberal ideology at a subjective level. Consumer attitudes are deeply embedded and helped many of the participants cope with the lockdown, either through sustained consumption or the dream of future indulgence when the 'old normal' resumed. The findings we have presented here highlight a subjective commitment to rethink the harmful elements of our existing social system but a general political reluctance to do so, alongside an absence of a coherent alternative narrative. The desire to return to the 'old normal' often outweighed any emergent sense of solidarity or slowing down to rethink priorities.

While the evidence in this paper suggests that the transformation inherent within the concept of the 'event' has not occurred during the pandemic, Dupuy (2014) reminds us that we maintain a fractal perspective on time and distance; the closer we are to something, we paradoxically believe we are further away and therefore the arrival comes as a shock. While we contend here that the transcendental materialist subject remains deeply committed to consumer desires and thus sustains a dysfunctional neoliberal consumer capitalism, Covid-19 may still be the 'event' that stimulates a shift towards more fundamental change.

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